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SUBJECT: REGIONAL ELECTIONS OFFER FEWER CHOICES

REF: A. MOSCOW 479  
[1](#)B. MOSCOW 467

Summary  
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[1](#)1. (SBU) Voters in 11 Russian regions will find fewer options on the ballot for their regional parliaments when they go to the polls March 2 in elections to be held concurrently with the selection of a new president. Following a trend that began with changes to the electoral legislation that required the State Duma to be elected on the basis of party lists only, some Russian regions also have introduced party lists into their regional parliaments. As the State Duma elections showed, dispensing with single mandate seats likely will result in limited opportunities for opposition and independent candidates to win representation in regional parliaments. In many regions, the liberal opposition parties Union of Right Forces and Yabloko are not taking part. Their dismal showing in the December elections left them with little money to run in local elections. Under Russian law, this lack of participation could jeopardize their long-term viability as political parties. End summary.

REGIONS FOLLOW NATIONAL TREND  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Eleven Russian regions will hold elections for their regional parliaments on March 2, the same day as presidential elections. The 11 are: the republics of Bashkortostan, Ingushetiya, Kalmykiya, and Yakutiya; Altay Kray, and the Amur, Ivanovo, Rostov, Sverdlovsk, Ulyanovsk, and Yaroslavl oblasts. Elections for mayor, city council, and local governing bodies in numerous cities and villages throughout the country will also take place on March 2. Most regions still maintain regional parliaments that are split between single mandate seats and proportional sets. Following a course set at the national level to elect members of the State Duma solely based on party lists, some regions have opted for a similar electoral system for their regional parliaments. Three regions which are holding regional elections - Ingushetiya, Kalmykiya, and Amur Oblast - have done away with single mandate seats and will chose their deputies from party lists. The other eight regions will use a mixed electoral system. Half of their members will be elected from single mandate districts and the other half from party lists.

[1](#)3. (SBU) A report issued by Aleksandr Kynev of the Fund for Information Policy said the move toward a proportional electoral system in the regions is another step toward the completion of regional reforms which began in 2003. "The proportional system little by little has been pushing out the single mandate districts." In past elections, St. Petersburg, the Moscow region, and Dagestan shifted to a purely proportional system. Others -- Chechnya and Primorskiy Kray -- have announced their intention to do so in

the future. Kemerovo is the only region that will continue to elect its regional parliament from single mandate districts only. Its next elections will be held in October 2008.

14. (SBU) Along with moving to a proportional electoral system, the number of parties actively participating in elections has dwindled. The four parties represented in the State Duma -- United Russia, Just Russia, the Communist Party (KPRF) and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) -- dominate regional elections. Other parties, including the Agrarian party and Civic Force, which were part of the coalition that nominated Dmitriy Medvedev for president, have had trouble registering their party lists in some regions. The Agrarians attempted to have their party lists registered in five regions, but failed in Ingushetiya and Altay Kray. Civic Force was only successful in registering its lists in Sverdlovsk and Yaroslavl. Only the four parliamentary parties have been registered in Bashkortostan, Ingushetiya, Altay Kray, Rostov and Ulyanovsk. Yaroslavl has registered the largest number of parties (nine), including the Green Party, People's Union and Patriots of Russia. Despite its place as one of the four parliamentary parties, Just Russia has faced its own troubles in the regions. A regional court ordered that Just Russia's party list and eight single-mandate candidates be removed from the ballot in Yaroslavl (ref A) and more recently, the party has been removed from the ballot in Yakutiya. Just Russia officials maintain that their ballot woes are the result of ruling party pressure in areas where United Russia is relatively weak.

15. (SBU) According to Kynev's report, 15 percent of party lists that were submitted for registration in the March 2 regional elections were refused. In regional elections which

MOSCOW 00000585 002 OF 002

took place in March 2007, every third party was refused registration. In December 2007, 42 of 64 lists were not registered. While the rate of denial has declined, Kynev posited that the stringent legislation had, election-by-election, eliminated "incorrect parties."

16. (SBU) Liberal opposition parties Union of Right Forces (SPS) and Yabloko, following their slim showing in the State Duma elections, are so down and out that they are barely participating in regional elections. Yabloko will not appear on any regional ballots despite attempts to do so in Ingushetiya and Altay Kray. SPS has registered a party list in Ivanovo. Lack of money and or ability to collect signatures were cited as the reasons by both parties. In contrast, the four parliamentary parties are not required to submit a deposit or collect signatures in regional elections.

While the cost of running in regional elections has turned out to be prohibitive for opposition parties, the threshold for entering regional parliaments in some regions is several percentage points lower than that required to enter the State Duma, and thereby potentially attainable for non-parliamentary parties. In Ivanovo, the threshold is four percent and in Yaroslavl it is five percent. In the other regions holding regional elections, the threshold is the same as for the State Duma, seven percent. "The 'old-timers' (Yabloko and SPS) are being pushed from the regions," Kynev said.

17. (SBU) The lack of participation by SPS and Yabloko puts their viability as political parties at stake. Under Russian law, political parties must participate in elections or risk losing their party registration. In order to maintain the status of a political party after January 1, 2009, parties must have their party list or at least one single mandate candidate participate in elections in at least 17 regions of the country in elections from 2004 to 2008. (Currently SPS and Yabloko have representatives in regional Dumas in 11 and 6 regions respectively, but we are still researching whether cumulatively these opposition parties will meet this threshold in 2009.)

## LIMITING POLITICAL COMPETITION

¶8. (SBU) In 2003, there were 44 political parties and at that time, they were able to form electoral blocs or alliances with like-minded partners. Now, as a result of changes to the Law on Elections, political blocs are prohibited and deputies, once elected, cannot change parties.

The consequences of changes to electoral law have been not only a move toward proportional elections at the national level and throughout the country, but a system that is dominated by only four political parties. "Regional political life has been gradually forced to imitate the four-party system of the federal center," said Kynev.

¶9. (SBU) To the extent political competition exists today, it is mostly seen (or unseen) within political parties as internecine battles take place over local control of the party. "The real struggle has taken on an internal character. In many regions, the so-called unity of United Russia is not as stable as it might seem," said Kynev, who cited as an example a conflict between Kalmykiya's President and the Mayor of its capital city, Elista. Both are members of United Russia. There has also been in-fighting in Ivanovo between the governor and a State Duma Deputy from the region which led to a mass resignation of regional Duma deputies and a call for early elections (ref B).

## COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) With the electoral amendments, the Kremlin said it sought an outcome that produced fewer parties, but ones with broad national representation. The result, indeed, is fewer parties, at the cost of opposition representation.

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